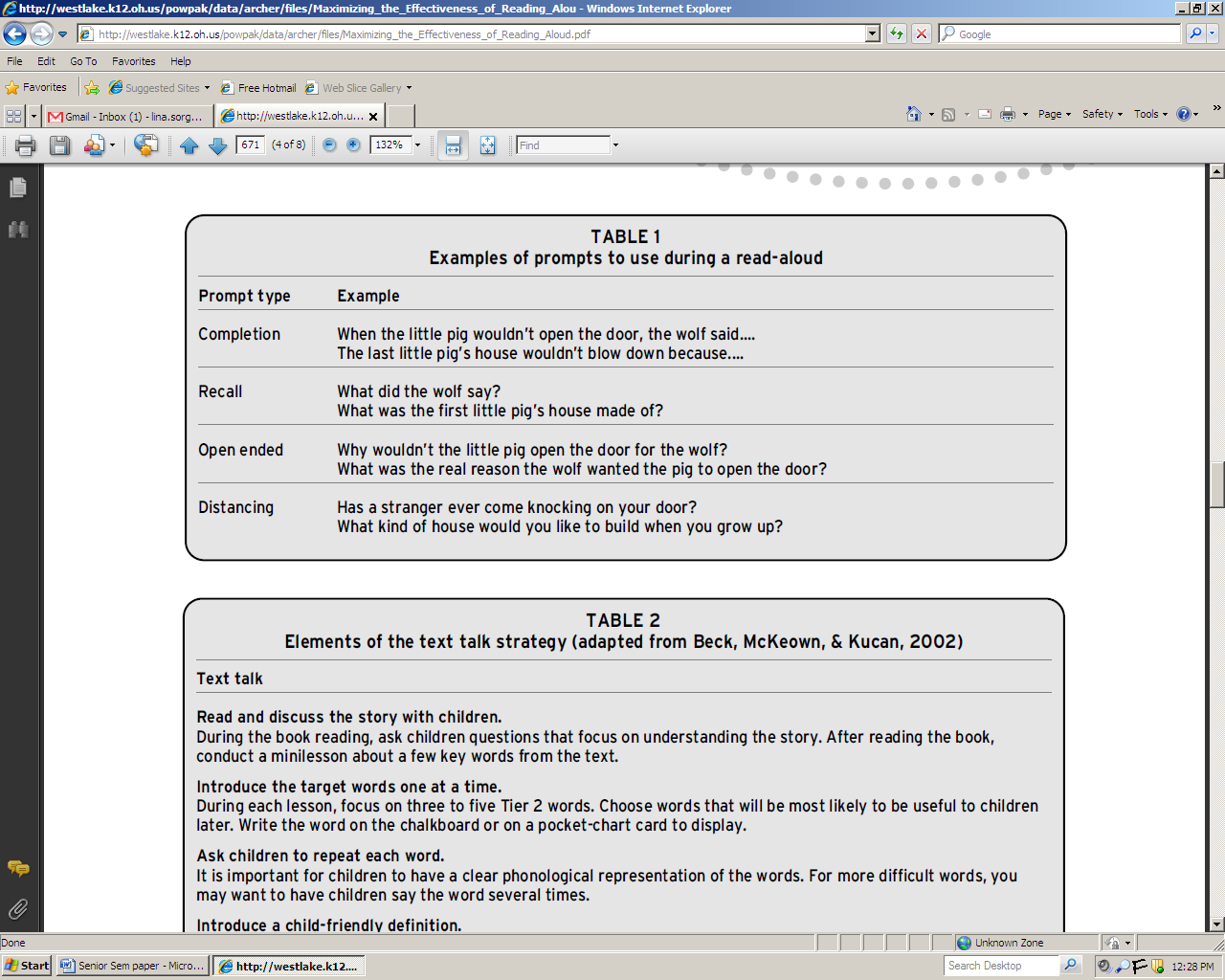
Childhood: the age in which everything and anything is possible. One is presented with multiple opportunities to transform into a superhero, a firefighter, or a princess, simply with the turn of a crisp page. Early reading during childhood is a necessity for positive mental and literacy development throughout life. Books and applicable reading materials are generally taken for granted both by children and adults. However, there are many young children who are not presented with such opportunities for reading prior to entering school, most often because of a difficult family life. Upon entering school, reading programs are sometimes ineffective, and often not designed to benefit the children struggling with literacy. “The problem is that policies and funding streams are too fragmented, programs too segmented by children’s age and grade, and key interventions too partial to get widespread, positive, results” (Why Reading). While this may be the case, there are certain strategies, all focused around read-aloud interactions between teacher and student, which, if observed, would greatly bolster reading success. Therefore, when engaging in read-aloud sessions with students, teachers must include multiple supplementary activities, both written and oral, to enhance comprehension and increase retention.

Recently, reading aloud to students has gained widespread attention as “the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading” (Anderson, qtd. in Lane). Yet, despite such extensive awareness, children continue to enter kindergarten with extremely varied, and often limited, reading experience:

“Of the fourth graders who took the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading test in 2009, 83% of children from low-income families – and 85% of low-income students who attend high-poverty schools – failed to reach the “proficient” level in reading” (Why Reading).

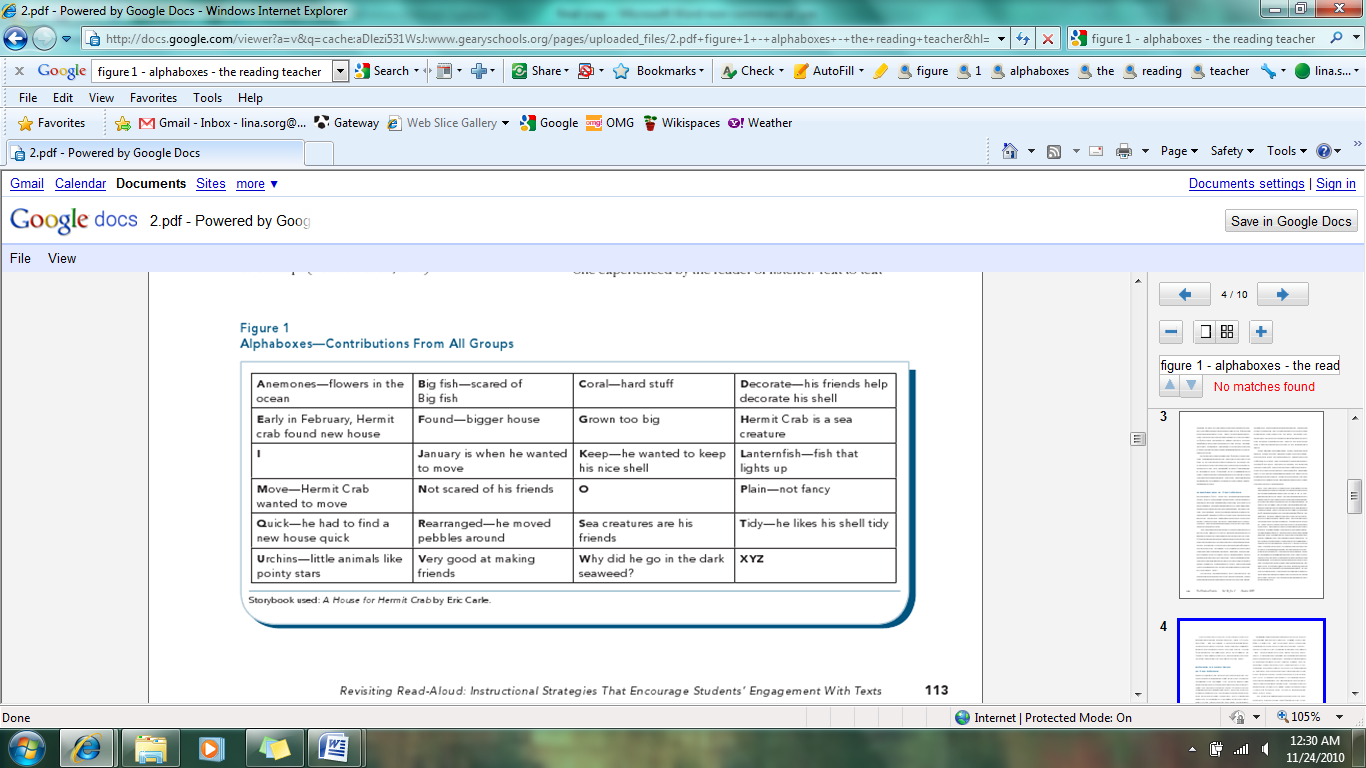
Hours of reading experience prior to school can vary from 25 to 1,500 hours. This presents a difficulty in how to adequately appeal to all children’s literary needs when they are so greatly varied. Thus, supplement activities during read-aloud sessions are the solution. Read-aloud sessions, when enhanced with both independent and collaborated writing and discussion activities, can be extremely beneficial to a child’s language development. In essence, if teachers simply read to children, with no engagement and probe to their curiosity, children will easily become bored and cease paying attention. However, if specific techniques are used to supplement simply reading, listening and comprehension skills will increase, vocabulary skills, including ability to recognize words, will mature. Syntax skills, which refer to recognizing and utilizing the flow of natural language composition, will also become honed.

One proposed method to maximize the effects of read-aloud discussions is dialogic reading. Dialogic reading, initiated primarily by a man known as Whitehurst, focuses on feedback of the reader, and the complexity of conversation. “The emphasis should be on asking ‘what’ questions, following answers with questions, repeating what the child says, and providing help and praise” (Lane 670). Additionally, the intricacy level of the conversation should be slightly above the current capabilities of the child. Though this method is most commonly used with preschoolers, it is effective for other early elementary school grades as well. There are four main types of prompts for questions that should be asked both during and after reading, each with a specific function. Completion prompts simply act as fill-in-the-blank, while recall prompts require a slightly tighter grasp on text comprehension. Open-ended prompts encourage the reader to use his own words, and distancing prompts force him to relate to his own personal experience and background knowledge. Table 1 (Lane 671) below demonstrates examples of these four types of questions:



Dialogic reading can be used both as a catalyst for oral discussion and as a written supplement. These types of questions allow students to work either individually or in groups, based on skill levels, to synthesize their own thoughts with those of others and the facts from a text.

When reading, efforts should be made to encourage young readers to form connections to their own background knowledge, which is useful not only in dialogic reading but in general group discussions as well. There are three types of connections [to prior existing knowledge] identified that young readers are capable of making: text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections (Morrison 113). They should be introduced to readers in this order, from simple to most complex, so as not to compromise attention span or insight. Text-to-self connections focus on crafting relations between textual context and personal experiences or ideas. Text-to-text connections concentrate on the identification of similarities and differences between the current literary work and those read or listened to in the past. Though advantageous for all ages, this type of connection is particularly beneficial if the texts being used are easily comparable. For example, “with three-year olds you could read two bedtime stories, both using similar patterns: Goodnight Moon by Margaret Wise Brown and Good Night, Gorilla by Peggy Rathmann, and then discuss the similarities and differences” (Trelease 80). And lastly, text-to-world connections are broader, and compel much more individual thought. They “require relating certain aspects of the text to what is happening or what has happened in the larger community of the world – for example, comparing current and historical events and people with that of the text” (Morrison 114). When encouraging students to become aware of connections, it is most beneficial for the teacher [or parent] to demonstrate each connection themselves. Developing brains learn best by example. Young readers tend to automatically make connections to their own knowledge about the subject at hand; thus, prompting conversations about a student’s background knowledge fosters connections and prolongs attention span. However, the younger the reader, the lesser amount of connections he or she is able to make. “In order to do so, they must be mature enough to keep more than one thing in their minds at a time – a basis for comparative thinking” (Trelease 80). Additionally, referencing background knowledge encourages the reader to predict what will happen next in the text; thus making guesses that either teachers or parents should help the children confirm or rebut. Using discussion about background information as a supplementary activity during a read-aloud session forces students to think for themselves, and forms connections between their own lives and the reading. Thus, they become more passionate and invested in the reading material, promoting recollection.

Another interesting strategy that currently gaining popularity is the Alphaboxes, based on the studies of Hoyt. This approach features students referencing main ideas with examples and details from the text, but that trick is that each example must pertain to a letter of the alphabet. Through this textual interaction, students “generate questions; highlight important concepts; make connections; provide explanations; locate, identify, and discuss unfamiliar words; and present different points of view” (Morrison 112). All of these lead to the ultimate drawing of connections and digestion of data, because they are higher-level cognitive procedures which encourage cognition. Here is an example of a typical Alphabox chart (Morrison 113):

Working to complete Alphaboxes in groups is even better, because “thinking is distributed among group members, and participants share cognitive responsibility while externalizing their thoughts as they work through tasks” (Morrison 112). Vanessa Morrison was able to sit in a classroom, and act as a teacher. Ultimately she collected student work and witnessed the direct effect of Alphaboxes. Morrison explains her experience:

“I showed them how to look for the target words and write examples…as we progressed, I increased the required number of boxes to be filled in. I have never required them to fill in all 26 boxes….it’s almost the end of the year and without me asking…they are filling in more and more of the boxes…I provided lots of support when we first started…and gradually they were able to do to on their own” (Morrison 112).

Alphaboxes are the epitome of strategies that should be implemented to benefit reading. After being read a book by their teacher, students have the chance to work individually or in small groups, which strengthens their independence as readers. As in a chain reaction, increased independence leads to greater satisfaction, which indicates a level of dedication to the text that ideally represents an increasing respect for reading and books.

It is also important to note the significance of vocabulary development through reading aloud. Thus, text talk, a read-aloud strategy to strengthen vocabulary, was developed by a team headed by Beck and McKeown. In the classroom, teachers should pick of few core words from the story to discuss in-depth; this should become the main point of the lesson. Word selection is important, and should focus on “words that can be connected to what students know, can be explained with words they know, and will be useful and interesting to others” (Lane 671). These words can be organized into three tiers. Tier one words are common and reoccurring in everyday interaction – examples are ‘school,’ ‘hungry,’ and ‘baby.’ Tier two words are those that are less common, but still vital to understanding language use, and easily utilized during everyday conversation. For this reason, it is suggested that this tier be used as a general starting point with students. Tier three words are often extremely difficult for children to grasp, because they are focused around a specific subject area, science, for example. ‘Isotope’ and ‘photosynthesis’ are both three tier words, while ‘coincidence’ and ‘devour’ are two tiers. However, it is important to introduce students to three tier words because an early reader “develops a vocabulary that is ‘near-genius’ in scope” (Trelease 66) in order to adapt to his ever-changing thoughts. The next step of text talk is to create definitions easily understood by young children. Dictionary definitions, because of the caliber of understanding often required, are generally not very useful for children. Teachers must craft a child-friendly definition that “uses everyday language to explain the meaning of the word” (Lane 672). However, looking words up in the dictionary every once in a while “greatly expands a child’s knowledge base and nurtures library skills” (Trelease 109). While a text is being specifically explored, teachers should also engage in immediate and nonimmediate talk. Immediate talk is more common, and involves answering any literal questions of the student, as well as providing picture context. Nonimmediate talk “extends beyond the text. It includes discussions of word meanings, making predictions and inferences, and relating the text-to-personal experiences” (Lane 659). Therefore, it is imperative that in-class discussions take on a broad scope. Through a one-on-one question and answer session with the teacher about vocabulary, greater understanding is gleaned than if a child tried to read with no guidance from a read-aloud session. A young reader’s own confusion and frustration with unknown word meanings would implement within him subconscious negativity towards reading, and thus the literary process.

“Print referencing refers to the verbal and non-verbal cues, such as tracking print or pointing to print in pictures, adults use to call children’s attention to important aspects of the text, including its forms, features, and functions” (Lane 672). There are multiple types of cues present throughout each story, both nonverbal and verbal. Verbal cues occur when the reader (teacher or parent) stops to comment or question on something from the text; nonverbal cues consist of, for example, pointing to words in certain lines when reading. This technique can “promote children’s development of print concepts, concept of word, and alphabet knowledge” (Lane 672). However, one must be careful not to overbalance this technique, because too much print referencing can take away from the meaning that should be gleaned from reading a book. It is estimated that anywhere from three to five print references during the reading of an averaged-size storybook is acceptable (Lane 673). Good Night Moon was aforementioned in a prior paragraph, and serves as a prime example for print referencing. Verbal referencing can be used to draw the child’s attention to the color and illustration aspects of the text. These elements are not beneficial to understanding *every* text and thus should not always be examined in depth, but here they provide an interesting lesson. As the story progresses, the clock hands change position and the sky outside the window grows darker. One could engage the reader by asking what such changes represent, and their influence upon the story. Print referencing as a supplement strategy involves going beyond the obvious that is simply and silently observed during read-aloud sessions; instead it focuses on ambiguous details that otherwise, without supplementary activities, would go unnoticed.

As with all things, an alternate perspective exists that calls into question the actual benefits of reading aloud in classrooms. Studies conducted in 1993 by Meyer, Wardrop, Linn, and Hastings concluded that “there are low to moderate negative correlations between time teachers spend reading aloud and their students’ reading achievement” (Lane 668). These findings imply that in classrooms where more read-aloud sessions take place, a student’s individual reading achievement suffers. “There [are] fewer interactions with students, and students spent less time reading on their own” (Lane 668). In this case, these studies comment on the fruitlessness of read-alouds if no accompanying oral/discussion or written activity is used. While it is true that consistent read-aloud sessions minimize the time students spend reading entirely on their own, this independence is satisfied through the during and post-reading activities, which call students’ understanding into question, and challenge them beyond the mere facts of books. “When we read aloud to children we are helping them to find themselves and to discover some meaning in the scheme of things” (Trelease 80).

In conclusion, as one can see, engaging in multiple read-aloud sessions with children, provided such sessions are complemented with both oral and/or written synthesis strategies, produces beneficial results. If constantly engaging in independent reading, with minimal/no support from a teacher, students will ultimately become frustrated. Due to the minimal attention span of a child, a lack of read-alouds, or read-alouds with no guidance, threaten the development of a positive opinion of books and reading. Yet, when literacy learning is augmented with creative comprehension strategies, students maintain more focus, a greater attention span, and ultimately greater respect for reading and literature. Books and the ability to read is a gift that should be utilized to its utmost potential, and supplementary activities allow that potential to be realized.

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